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ABSTRACT

The importance of considering the students's goal for attending community college in examining attrition is addressed. A total of 282 new students (18% of all new students) entering a community college in fall 1990 were tracked. Four items from the Entering Student Information Survey were examined: the degree the student plans to work toward at the community college; for nondegree seekers, the number of courses the students plans to take; the highest degree the student plans to earn; and three "most important" goals. Followup letters were sent to students who completed the survey to determine whether the student attained their most important goal, and when applicable, the reason they did not return to the college. Student files were used to obtain additional information on student characteristics. Findings include: 32.6 percent of students indicated that they were not seeking a degree or certificate, while 159 were seeking a degree and 18 were seeking a certificate; and 61 percent of those not seeking a degree were certain of their career choice, compared to 78 percent of those seeking a certificate and 64 percent of those seeking a degree. It is concluded that attrition should refer only to students who do not achieve their stated goals. Contains nine references. (SW)

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Goal Attainment:

A New Look at the Meaning of Attrition at a Community College

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Abstract

Students attend community colleges for a broader range of reasons than they attend four-year schools or even private two-year schools. Because they come for a variety of reasons, we should not assume that the degree or certificate is the sole measure of success; that students who not attain a degree have not attained their personal goal--the reason **they** established for attending college. This study looks at the various subgroups in the entering cohort, determines attrition in terms of successful or unsuccessful goal attainment and supports the premise that attrition should refer only to those students who do not achieve their stated goals. This paper is of particular interest to community college professionals involved with retention programs and outcomes assessment.

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This paper was presented at the Thirty-Fifth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Boston Sheraton Hotel & Towers, Boston, Massacusetts, May 28-31, 1995. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Jean Endo
Editor
AIR Forum Publications

Goal Attainment:

A New Look at the Meaning of Attrition at a Community College

Introduction

One of the major problems with attrition studies, like graduation studies, is that all institutions are not alike with regard to mission, role and scope. Students attend community colleges for a broader range of reasons than they attend four-year schools or even private two-year schools. Because they come for a variety of reasons, we should not assume that the degree or certificate is the sole measure of success; that students who not attain a degree have not attained their personal goal--the reason **they** established for attending college. Many studies do not look closely at the fact that many students do not **intend** to complete enough courses to receive a degree or certificate. They attend for personal enrichment or to get those few courses for career enhancement, general education (to transfer to a four-year institution) or basic skills remediation. The reasons for which they come should define attrition; attrition heretofore will be focused on goal attainment. This study looks at the various subgroups in the entering cohort, determines attrition in terms of successful or unsuccessful goal attainment and supports the premise that attrition should refer only to those students who do not achieve their state goals.

This study will look at new students entering in Fall 1990 and track them through the current semester at the college. Their attrition or persistence will be shadowed by the information they provided on an Entering Student Information Survey (ESIS). Each new

student is asked to complete this brief survey. Four items are relevant to this study: (1) what degree do you plan to work toward at GCTC; (2) if you are **not** seeking a degree or certificate, indicate the number of courses you plan to take at GCTC; (3) what is the highest degree you plan to earn; and (4) indicate the three most important goals--in priority order--you hope to achieve. Attrition (positive or negative) or persistence will be analyzed according to their reasons for attending.

Review of the Literature

The literature is replete with books and articles concerning attrition and retention. [Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) discuss almost every aspect of this issue; ERIC files have many unpublished dated and current institutional studies.] While most of them emphasize theoretical analyses and practical methods for improving retention, precious few recognize that leaving college may not have such a negative connotation. As Terenzini (1987) points out, the problem lies in the fact that what constitutes "dropping out" is a matter of perspective; that it is not necessarily a bad thing--for the student or the institution. (p.21) Perhaps moreso in the case of the community college with its expansive, egalitarian mission, success may not correspond to the completion of an academic degree or certificate, or even a full academic year. Additionally, leaving without such a credential should not necessarily be construed as a result of unsatisfactory academic performance. "Withdrawal may indicate that the individual got from the institution exactly what he or she had come for." (p. 21) Even interpretations of US Department of Education statistics lead with the negative connotation that leaving is bad: "nearly half of the students who enter higher education will have left before completing either

an associate or bachelor's degree." (Kluepfel and Roberts, p. 2). To some extent, this is tied to academic underpreparedness; but this factor, in and of itself, is in no way the only reason for non-completion.

Most retention or persistence studies, even for community colleges, measure success in terms of earning the credential over some period of time, but do not look at shorter-term goal attainment. Herein we do ourselves an injustice. There are institutional studies that tend to focus on persistence or graduation rates for success. These studies usually analyze the reasons why students stay or leave or make recommendations on how to improve retention. However, most of the studies that look at attrition present the negative side and create a profile for identification of the "high-risk" student or make recommendations for institutional change. There is much to be said for this type of research since, with a considerable number of "non-completers," there is negative attrition.

Tinto's 1975 model established that individuals enter social organizations--students enter college--with varying background attributes and experiences, as well as personal educational achievement expectations--goal commitments--and initial levels of affinity for the particular college--institutional commitments. (Halpin, p. 22) However, this and many succeeding studies applying this or related models focus on four-year institutions and either residential or commuter students. At a community college, the idea cannot be emphasized enough that degree attainment is not the sole purpose for attending. Aside from the fact that increasing percentages of new students have no desire to obtain a degree, many already hold baccalaureate or advanced degrees when they enroll. Halpin (1990) applies Tinto's model to a

community college and concludes that the model , as used in his study, has utility for researchers and administrators concerned about retention and does predict persistence or exit outcomes (p. 30); but it does not examine reasons for attendance. Cope (1978) does indeed deal with this issue--that students enroll but have no intention of completing the established curriculum. Drew concludes, "it must be realized that it is not a failure on the institution's part if a student has achieved his/her personal education goal and has withdrawn from the institution before graduation." (p. 55) But her paper continues with a proposed plan for freshman retention.

In an interview published in the Journal of Developmental Education in September, 1990, Tinto, reflecting on his past research and experiences, explains that "attrition was predominantly thought of as reflecting the failure of the individual to measure up to college, either through a lack of maturity , a personality flaw or a lack of ability....We cannot assume that....In fact, in any institution, more students leave in good academic standing than leave because of the inability to keep up their grades." (p. 18) Regarding retention, Tinto concludes, "if the only question a college asks itself is how to keep students, it is the wrong question. The question...effective institutions ask is how we should ensure that all, not just some, of our students are able to learn and grow." (p. 24) Retention is not just keeping students who would not otherwise stay; just as attrition occurs not only because a student could not measure up. The question that the institution must ask is to whom, or to what.

In a 1985 work, Noel (pp. 10-15) discusses themes of attrition, indicating that it is impossible to pinpoint the single, specific reason why a student leaves; that dropping gout of

college is a complex decision that is nearly always the result of a combination of factors. He identifies his major themes of attrition as academic boredom, transition/adjustment problems, limited and/or unrealistic expectations of college, academic underpreparedness, incompatibility, and irrelevancy. Nowhere in the list is the view, perhaps simplistic, that the student achieved his or her goal, completed the objective, and walked away a winner. Studies of these students and their institutions are lacking in the literature. In the same volume Forrest discusses creating conditions for success, both for students and the institution; but this chapter does not concede that a student may leave the institution before achieving the credential and still be successful.

Tinto (1987) allows that those who attend college and fail to obtain a degree may have benefitted from higher education. (p. 1) He notes that dropout is used "to describe the action of all leavers, regardless of the reasons or conditions which mark their leaving. But leavers do not think of themselves as failures. Many see their actions as quite positive steps toward goal fulfillment." (p. 3) His observations of student departure, especially from the two-year sector, however, focus on degree completion--sometime, somewhere; that 42 percent of all two-year college entrants will earn a college degree of some type and that 58 percent will leave the system--sometime, somewhere--without having done so. But there is no analysis of intent.

In her 1992 study at Cuyamaca Community College, Fralick identifies negative and positive attrition. She places high-risk students--no goal or college major, high school average of C or below--in the negative attrition category (left before the end of the semester; grade point average of 1.0 or below) and successful students--definite goal or college major, high

school average B+ or better--in the positive attrition category (grade point average of 2.1 to 4.0). However, her study also looked at satisfaction with the institution; that negative attrition students would be dissatisfied with the institution and that positive attrition students would be satisfied with the institution.

Methodology

The methodology for this study will use a cohort survival analysis of students who enrolled at the college for the first time in fall 1990 in credit courses. The student file will be combined with a database created from the Entering Student Information Survey (ESIS) administered at fall registration. The student file will contribute data regarding age, sex, ethnicity, curriculum, last term enrolled, grade-point average, and, if applicable, graduation year; the ESIS database will contribute information regarding perceived attendance, degree attainment and academic/career/personal goals to be achieved at the college. The Fall 1990 entering cohort was selected because other research studies at the College have shown that, of those students who do graduate, 75 percent do so in three to five years and, if attaining the associate degree was the stated goal, this measure of successful attainment should not be diluted.

As a follow-up, a brief letter was sent to all students who responded to the ESIS. The letter reiterated the most important goal they hoped to achieve at the college and asked them to indicate if they believed this goal was accomplished and to explain why or why not. If the goal was not accomplished, they were asked to select a reason why they did not return to the College.

After combining information from the student file and ESIS into a single database, all data were analyzed using various statistical functions of SPSS for Windows (version 6.1).

Data Analysis

Each fall, the Office of Institutional Research, Planning and Development conducts a survey of new students (first-time at the college, enrolled in credit courses). In fall 1990, 1,597 new students enrolled at the College. Of this number, 342 returned the Entering Student Information Survey (ESIS) at or after registration; 23 were eliminated because the Social Security Number was missing and no match could be made with the student file. Additionally, 37 students were removed because their Social Security Number was not on the list of fall 1990 new students; review of their records indicated that they had been previously enrolled. This brought the number of students with usable surveys to 282-- 18 percent of all new students in fall 1990.

The demographics for the students in the study are not appreciably different from the student body as a whole. They were 72 percent female, 80 percent white and predominantly (85 percent) under 40 years of age (with 37 percent between 20 and 29). The College's student body in fall 1990 was 63 percent female, 75 percent white and predominantly (79 percent) under 40 (with 39 percent between 20 and 29)

More than half the respondents indicated that they attended South Central Community College because of its academic reputation or courses offered; two-thirds were very certain about their career choice; three-quarters were very certain about their major field of study; one-third indicated they were not pursuing a degree or certificate at South Central. Twelve

percent indicated they did not intend to obtain a degree from any college or university; 30 percent indicated that their highest degree would be a certificate or associate degree; 33 percent indicated a bachelors degree and 17 percent indicated postgraduate study.

Forty-two percent of the ESIS respondents did not attend for more than one year (22 percent left after fall 1990; 18 percent left after spring 1991; two percent took summer courses but did not return). By the end of the 1991-92 academic year, almost 62 percent were gone; another 20 percent did not return after the third year (1992-93) and by the end of the 1993-94 academic year, 95 percent were gone. As of this writing, 13 of the original 282 (4.6%) have enrolled for fall 1994. It should be noted here that by spring 1994, 44 students in the respondent cohort (15.6 percent) did receive a degree or certificate.

For all new students in fall 1990, 45 percent did not return after spring 1991; another 27 did not return after spring 1992; another 11 percent did not return after spring 1993 and almost 91 percent were gone at the end of spring 1994. Seventy of the original 1,596 (4.4%) enrolled for fall 1994. By spring 1994, 146 of all new, fall 1990 students (9.1 percent) received a degree or certificate.

Degree or Not Degree

The premise of this study was that not all students come to college for the degree. The first iteration of the analysis will compare the differences among the various survey items between those seeking a degree and those not. The entering cohort was divided into three subgroups based on Item #1: (1) not seeking a degree or certificate, (2) seeking a certificate (30 credits or less) or (3) seeking an associate degree from this college. Almost one-third

(90/282; 32.6 percent) indicated they were not seeking a degree or certificate; 177 were seeking a certificate (18) or a degree (159). The 17 who did not answer this question will be tracked a separate subgroup for enrollment persistence and goal selection.

Respondents not seeking a degree tended to be slightly older (54.5 percent under 30; 63.4 percent between 20 and 40) than those seeking the degree (73.0 percent under 30; 56.0 percent between 20 and 40). Of those seeking a certificate, half were under 30 and about one-third were over 40. The percentage of females and males was about the same in each category. Sixty percent of White students were seeking a degree or certificate, in contrast to almost 75 percent of the African-American students and 80 percent of Hispanic-American students.

Overall, about two-thirds of all respondents (63.5%) were very certain of their career choice: sixty-one percent of those not seeking a degree at South Central were very certain of their career choice, compared to 78 percent of those seeking a certificate and 64 percent of those seeking a degree.

As might be expected, a higher percentage of those seeking a degree or certificate were very certain about their program of study, compared to those not seeking a degree at South Central (69% and 72% vs. 48%). However, more than one-third of those not seeking a degree did not respond to this item.

Regarding highest degree plans, almost half (46.7%) of those who did not respond to the SCCC Degree item did not respond to this item either; 46.7 percent also indicated a bachelor's or postgraduate degree as their highest. More than one-third (36.7%) of those

indicating no South Central degree indicated no degree on this item as well; 17 percent noted associate, 26 percent noted bachelor and 19 percent noted postgraduate. About 40 percent of those seeking a certificate (38.9%) indicated this would be their highest degree; 28 percent indicated a higher degree, 28 percent did not respond. Thirty-nine percent of those seeking an associate degree at South Central indicated this would be their highest degree; almost 60 percent (57.9%) noted a bachelor or postgraduate as their highest degree.

Not surprisingly, those not seeking a degree from South Central completed fewer credits than those seeking a degree: 62 percent of the non-degree seekers completed less than 12 credits between fall 1990 and summer 1994, compared to 30 percent of those seeking a degree. About the same percentage from each group completed 12 to 30 credits (28.9% vs. 28.3%, non seeking and degree seeking, respectively; 28.3 percent of degree seekers completed more than 45 credits.

Two of the 15 students who did not respond to the SCCC degree item did, in fact, receive a degree within the four years; no one who indicated No Degree from South Central received one; two of the 18 who indicated they were seeking a certificate received one; and 40 of the 159 who indicated they were seeking a degree received one.

Excluding graduates, students not seeking a degree from South Central had a significantly higher percentage of A and B grades than students seeking a degree (60% vs. 38.7%). The former group also had a lower percentage of C grades (22.2% vs. 32.8%) and D grades (4.4% vs 15.1%) and a comparable percentage of F grades (13.3% vs. 13.4%).

More than half the respondents not seeking a degree (53.3%) left after two semesters, compared with 42.8 percent of those seeking a degree and 54 percent of those not responding. Looking at fall 1994, three percent of those not seeking a degree (three students) and five percent of those seeking a degree (excluding graduates, six students) were enrolled. [It should be noted here that students enrolled in fall 1994 may have previously "stopped out" and were not continuously enrolled.]

There remains one last analysis in this section--a comparison of Most Important Goal by Intention to Receive a Degree at South Central. Of the 16 goal statements listed in the survey, only three were not selected by any respondent. In addition, twenty-five respondents (8.9%) did not select any goal statements; 60 percent were students not seeking a degree from South Central.

The goal most selected was Obtain a Certificate or Degree (63 respondents; 22.3%): 81 percent were students who wanted a degree from South Central; 16 percent did not. It should be noted here that this choice was not restricted to South Central; but some ambiguity could be presumed.

The next most selected goal was Increase Knowledge in an Academic Field: 76 percent were those seeking a degree; 23 percent were not. Rounding out the academic goals area, but not the third-place goal, 22 respondents (7.8%) indicated Complete Courses to Transfer. Not surprisingly, almost 60 percent of these did not intend to receive a degree from South Central. Almost 23 percent of degree seekers and 14 percent of certificate seekers selected this goal as most important.

The third and fourth most selected goals were from the collection dealing with jobs and careers. Twenty-seven respondents (9.6%) noted Improve Knowledge, Technical Skills and/or Competencies Required for Job or Career. There was a fairly close split between those seeking the degree (51.9%) and those not (44.4%). A close fourth was Prepare for a New Career, selected by 25 respondents (8.9%): almost two-thirds (64.0%) were seeking a degree from South Central. The remaining goals from this section, Formulate Long-term Career Plans, Discover Career Interests and Increase Chances for a Raise or Promotion were selected by 5.3 percent, 3.5 percent and 1.8 percent of the respondents, respectively.

The fifth and six most selected goals were from the personal development area. Develop the Ability to Be Independent was noted by 22 respondents (7.8%): 54.5 percent were degree seekers, 27.3 percent were not and 18.2 percent did not indicate a degree goal. Learn Skills to Enrich My Life was noted by 17 respondents (6.0%): the mix for this goal was 53 percent seeking a degree or certificate, 27 percent not seeking a credential from South Central and six percent non-responders. The remaining responses were Increase Self-confidence (1.8%), Increase Participation in Cultural/Social Events (0.7%) and Improve Leadership Skills (0.4%).

Go-o-o-o-o-a-l

Considering that almost 60 percent of the respondents indicated that they planned to work for a degree at South Central, there was a diverse array of academic, career or personal development goals selected by all respondents. The analysis here will look at the goal statements by demographic characteristics [age range, sex and ethnicity] and then for their

degree plans at South Central and ultimate degree plans. The results of the follow-up survey will provide some indication of whether these goals were achieved.

Demographics

Age Range: Fifty-three percent of the respondents who were under 20 selected academic goals as most important (Mode = Obtain a Degree;); 26.7 percent selected career goals and 11.4 percent selected personal goals as most important [8.9% No Response]. In the 20 to 29 range, 50.9 percent selected academic goals, 27 percent selected career goals and 14.4 percent selected personal goals as most important [7.7% No Response]. In the 30 to 39 range, 28,6 percent selected academic goals and 39.3 percent selected career goals (Bimodal = Obtain a Degree and Prepare for a New Career;); 16.1 percent selected career goals and 16.1 percent did not respond.

In the 40 to 49 range, 46.3 percent selected academic goals (Mode = Increase Knowledge in an Academic Field; 28.6%), 25 percent selected career goals and 28.5 percent selected personal goals (Mode = Become More Independent; 21.4%). In the 50 to 59 range, two of the nine respondents selected academic goals, four selected career goals and three selected personal goals. Of those over sixty, one of six selected Increase Knowledge, one selected Prepare for a New Career and three selected personal goals [one No Response].

Sex: Academic Goals were selected by 43.4 percent of the female respondents and 49.4 percent of the male respondents. Career goals were selected by 30.2 percent of the female respondents and 30.4 percent of the male respondents. Personal goals were selected by 18.8 percent of the female respondents and 11.4 percent of the male respondents. The data

revealed that for personal goals, 10 percent of the female respondents noted Develop the Ability to become More Independent (cf. 2.5% of males) and seven percent noted Learn Skills to Enrich Daily Life (cf. 3.8% males).

Ethnicity: Forty-four percent of Whites selected academic goals compared with 53 percent of African-Americans and 47 percent of Hispanics (Asian- and Native Americans had too few respondents to be meaningful in the analysis). Carer goals were selected as most important by more than one-third of Whites, 20 percent of African-Americans and 13 percent of Hispanics. Personal Goals were most important to 16 percent of Whites, 15 percent of African-Americans and 27 percent of Hispanics.

Degree Plans

This section will present an analysis of goal importance for respondents to the SCCC Degree item and then, controlling for that response, look at goal importance according to Highest Degree plans.

The most important goal for those not seeking a degree at South Central was to complete courses necessary to transfer to another institution (13 respondents; 14.4%), followed by improve knowledge, technical skills and/or competencies required for job or career (12 respondents; 13.3%), obtain a certificate or degree (10 respondents; 11.1%), and increase knowledge in an academic field (nine respondents; 10.0%); all other responses were each less than 10 percent of the total. Fifteen respondents (16.7%) did not select a goal.

Controlling for this response, more than one-third (33 respondents; 36.7%) did not plan to receive a degree from any institution. Of these, five (15.2%) selected Learn Skills to

Enrich Daily Life; four (12.1%) selected Improve Knowledge, Technical Sills or Competencies Required for Job or Career; and three each (9.1%) noted Increase Knowledge in an Academic Field, Complete Courses to Transfer or Develop the Ability to become More Independent [six No Response]. For those seeking an associate for the highest degree, there was no clear pattern of choices for goals. For those seeking the bachelor's degree (25.6%), about 60 percent of the respondents noted academic goals. For those planning to seek a postgraduate degree, 23.5 percent of the respondents selected either complete courses to transfer or improve job skills as the most important goal.

For those planning to receive a certificate from South Central, the most important goal was to obtain the certificate (38.9%). Increase knowledge in an academic field and complete courses to transfer, combines, were noted by 38.9 percent as most important. Controlling for this response, 38.9 percent sought the certificate as their highest degree; again, there was no pattern for goal selection.

The most important goal for those planning to obtain the associate degree from South Central was to obtain the degree, but this was noted by only 27.7% of the respondents; followed by increase knowledge in an academic field (17.6%), Plan for a new career (10.1%), improve job skills (8.8%), formulate long term career plans (8.2%), and develop the ability to be independent (7.5%).

Controlling for the SCCC degree, 39 percent of the respondents indicated that the associate degree would be their highest, 41.5 percent indicated the bachelor's would be their highest and 16.4 percent noted they planned to earn a postgraduate degree. [Although only

five of these respondents indicated their most important goal was to complete course to transfer, 92 (57.9%) indicated they planned to pursue a bachelor's or postgraduate degree as their highest.] For those planning only an associate degree, about 40 percent selected academic goals as most important (23% noted Obtain a Degree) while another 40 percent noted career goals as most important; the remainder selected personal goals or did not respond. For those planning to pursue a bachelor's degree, 48 percent selected academic goals as most important (32% noted Obtain a Degree), 30 percent selected career goals as most important and the remainder chose personal goals or did not respond. For those planning postgraduate education, almost two-thirds selected academic goals as most important, 23 percent selected career goals and the remainder noted personal goals or did not respond. [The 15 No Response for the SCCC Degree, there was no discernable pattern by goal or highest degree.] The data tend to point to academic goals being more important as the highest planned degree is more advanced.

Follow-up Survey

Of the 257 letters sent out (25 did not respond to this item in the survey), there were only 35 usable returns (13.6%); 30 were returned as undeliverable by the Postal Service. Of those reponding, 22 said that they did achieve their goal, 13 did not.

Table 1. Indication of Achievement of Stated Goals.

MOST IMPORTANT GOAL	N	Responses	Achieved	Not Achieved
Increase knowledge in Academic Field	42	5	2	3
Obtain Certificate or Degree	63	13	8	5
Complete Courses to Transfer	22	3	3	
Discover Career Interests	11	0		
Formulate Career Plans	15	2	1	1
Prepare for a New Career	25	7	4	3
Improve Job Skills/Competencies	27	2	2	
Increase Chances for Raise/Promotion	5	0		
Become Involved in Campus Activities	2	1		1
Increase Self-confidence	5	0		
Improve Leadership Skills	1	0		
Learn Skills to Enrich Daily Life	17	1	1	
Develop Ability to be Independent	22	1	1	

Conclusions

While the data provided interesting comparisons among the different goal-selection groups, the low response rate to the follow-up letter did not provide adequate information. Also, the State's Department of Higher Education data base will have to be queried to track students who transferred to public institutions of higher education; students who transferred to independent schools or out of state cannot be centrally tracked.

This study will be replicated for the new students in Fall 1992, Fall 1993 and Fall 1994. Early results can only be applied to those students who indicated that they did not want to achieve a degree from this or any college. A mechanism should also be implemented for students who may have changed their initial plans after attending for one or two semesters.

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